

What Ever Happened to the Class of '82? We Went to School for Two Weeks to Find Out.

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It's 8:28 AM, center hall, Grant High School. Two minutes before the bell. Two minutes to size up everybody's outfits. Two minutes to catch a few more tunes. This is not easy. The racket is tremendous: to hear you've got to scrunch your head pretty close to your radio but to be cool you've got to look like you don't particularly care.

Craaaaaack that whip

Step on a crack

Break your mama's back

When a problem comes along

You must whip it

Whip it good

I say whip it!

Whip it good

It'd be a lot easier to hear somewhere else, but at Grant you either hang out in center hall before school or you just don't make it. Like a lot of other things in high-school life, you don't have much choice but to know the rules, the social codes, and stick to them. It's the way high school is in 1982, and that's the way it was in 1972, in 1962, in the bobby-socked 50s, and probably since time began.

Some of those codes never change: It's still not cool to be funny looking, play in the school band, fart in class, or be too serious. It is cool to be cute and rich, hate your parents, and party to the max. Has anything changed? Plenty.

Remember, this is the generation of high-schoolers born after Vietnam and during Brooke Shields: kids who have grown up knowing a buckling economy, a swollen Sunbelt, designer chocolates, cable TV. They seem class-conscious and worldly, and bored in a way that can happen only when you see your dreams pinned on a Laffer curve. They think the past was probably belter than the future will be: they have an inkling that just a while ago there were more kids than parents, that youth culture was *the* culture, and young rebellion was the groove the whole world wanted to be in. No more. Now, like their parents, they have nuclear-war fears edging on fatigue, and money worries on the brain. And they're

certain the rest of the world could never understand the secret life of teen-agers. That's what I went back to high school to find out.

At Grant, center hall is disputed turf. This morning, there's a healthy turnout of soshes, your typical YSVs and preppies. On the radiator, a group of jocks and jockettes lean back and talk. The other radiator is black territory. An errant park rat or two wanders through. Drama groupies are hanging a sign for a bake sale. In the hall, a cluster of rockers play guitar. Awesome. Today, the Worst List will circulate, and a few girls, reputed to be good girls, are getting edgy. Everyone's counting on this weekend — parties, good or rasty, guarantee a few decent rounds of quarters. Bound to be intense. If not, just shouldertap some beer and hang out.

Gel it? No? This is the universe of high school.

Sosh is short for “socialite” and long on meaning — soshes are kids who've made it, who dress right, run for Rose Princess, date the rally girls. If you're just rich, you have a Nordstrom credit card: if you're a sosh, the raised numbers on it are practically worn off. “A sosh?” asks one senior who prides herself on hating them. “Easy. Soshes went to Alameda or Laurelhurst grade school. On weekends they go to keggers. The sosh girls have medium-length permed hair, wear Izod shirts, James Jeans, Sbicca shoes, and carry LeSport Sac purses. That's at Grant. At Lincoln, they wear button-down shirts, Levis, Topsiders, and carry straw purses. And sosh guys wear Mr. Rags sweatshirts and jeans. It's all Sally Rally stuff — who's cute, who's got money, you know.”

It's tough to get a sosh to cop being a sosh; like being talented, it's a fine thing to have *said* about you, but a totally conceited label to affix to yourself. As Grant becomes more and more a school of economic extremes, it also provokes a certain eat-the-rich resentment among a lot of kids who hate themselves every time they tear a Penny's label out of their ersatz Izod shirts. Twenty years ago, Grant was homogenous — upper middle class, white, college-bound. Now enough students are disadvantaged for the school to qualify for federal assistance: 35 per cent of the kids aren't white; less than half of them go to college. So Grant, known among adults as the kind of school that turns out Bob Packwoods and Gordon Fullertons, is known among kids as a sosh school with an edge of moneyed snobbery. Or a YSY school, which stands for yellow ski vest, another expensive garment at one time even more necessary than the ubiquitous \$23 Izod shirt for social success. Some sosh girls even belong to social clubs that were, like Cuieaf, outlawed by the school system 20 years ago because they were unfairly exclusive.

The difference between jocks and soshes, goes the standard joke, is that jocks are dead serious about sports and soshes just want to be seen at football games. “Are you going skiing this weekend?” a girl asks a friend who is fretting with her uncooperative knickers. The bell is about to ring and they're readying to go. “I love skiing. I mean I hate it. My hair is always a mess and I've always got black lines of mascara running down my face.” The sosh crowd is moving out of center hall to the first class of the day. It's the only warm morning in ages, and they've all broken out their brand-new spring clothes — a Beet's worth of sailor shins, a campaign headquarter's worth of red, white and blue. Her friend never

answers, so the girl with mascara problems just shrugs and leaves, stopping for a last gaze at the soft-focus photos of Grant's six Rose Princess candidates.

There are a lot of kids who aren't soshes but who aren't dorks, either. Many are groupies of some kind or other — drama groupies, yearbook groupies, dance groupies. Being a groupie means defining yourself by a certain interest, and, more importantly, it means resigning yourself to not quite succeeding as a sosh but refusing to be swept into the amorphous blob of students who slip through Grant virtually unnoticed. Groupies have various degrees of cachet, depending on the object of desire. For instance band groupies, in time-honored tradition, are usually dumped on. But Grant's band groupies, spunkier than most, recently appealed their case in an irate letter to the school newspaper. "Dear *Grantonian* editor: The Grant High School band would like to let you know how we feel. We have gone to almost every football game, no matter where, even in the rain. If you did not know, rain can ruin instruments. . . . We have been devoted to this school and gotten no thanks for it. We have never once been in the *Grantonian* since school started. . . . P.S. Wednesday night we had our Spring concert and there were about 25 people there."

The halls are clear; first period begins. It's dry and sunny, so even this early in the morning the park rats are gathering in the parking lot by the gap in the chain-link fence that separates Grant High from Grant Park. In a minute they slip through it, out of the reach of school officials. They call the crest of the little hill in the park the smoking lounge, and it's a sure bet that on any decent day, a little knot of park rats will be up there getting high. Today everybody seems to have run out of marijuana, so the arrival of the most reliable park-rat dealer is anxiously awaited. She shows up patting the belly of her skintight jeans — if you look carefully, you can notice that it bulges a bit. That's the stash. Today Chris has \$5 bags of pot and more expensive Thai slick, and she's got trouble in her soul because she's due back in class on the double.

"Chris, could you puh-leeze carry me till Friday? I've only got \$2.50. I swear I won't bogue." Chris nods. The girl is elated, but then breaks the first rule of park rats by not lighting up and sharing. "I'm saving it for a friend," she says sheepishly, backing away. She trots off, embarrassed. A wispy blonde girl named Terry flops on the swing set. "Park rats, park rats, that's what they call us," she sighs. "I don't care. Every one inside the school is so snobby, talking about this boyfriend and that boyfriend. Out here, everyone is mellow and we're all cool to each other." A pipe is being passed around to the dozen kids hanging out here. "I sure like Oregon better than where we used to live," Terry says. "Boy! It was terrible! We were *the* party family in Utah. We had a real reputation. I'm glad we left." She suddenly notices two middle-aged men in the park. So does Tom, a scruffy kid with an endless grin. The two of them speculate about whether these two men might also be smoking pot. "Well," Tom giggles, "my dad smokes weed but he's real funky about it. He buys really cheap weed. He says it lasts longer."

The park rats spend most of their time figuring out how to sneak out to the park to get high, and it is an all-day preoccupation.

“Multiple highs,” says Tom. “My idea of heaven is for everybody to skip classes and we’d each have half an ounce of pot out here. It’d be so fine.” Finer yet is that school seems a million miles away. Half of the park rats aren’t really enrolled at Grant anymore anyway, so the chatter naturally lights on topics other than homework and term papers. Today it’s what to name the mangy puppy that one of the kids has. Unanimous decision: “Bummer.” The puppy is fast choking on a pine cone that someone has fed him, so the issue may soon be moot.

There will be no park-rat Rose Princess candidate: there won’t be a park-rat prom. All there is for them is sovereignty in the park, and they worry that they’re being muscled out by black kids.

Park rats aren’t the only Grant students that get high. Hardly. Marijuana is such a common substance and subject that do you or don’t you is viewed as a stupid question. The issue is how much and when. If you don’t smoke pot at all, you’re either really straight or so cool that you’ve come full circle. If you smoke a little, it’s just fashionable. If you smoke a lot on weekends, you’re cool. If you smoke a lot all the time, you’re either very cool — that is, smart enough to do well in school, keep your room clean, be high all the time and bet your parents \$500 that you can quit for a year — or you’re a park rat. Same thing with earrings. If you don’t pierce your ears at all, you’re either very straight or a real purist; if you have two holes, you’re just average; if you have three, you’re pretty cool; if you have four, you’re either very trendy or a park rat. With boys it’s more complicated. Piercing one ear has become fashionable with Grant guys, so the old standard — that it meant you were either a biker or a homosexual — no longer holds.

Marijuana is by far the most popular drug. “A lot of kids take speed or caffeine pills too,” says one senior, “cause school’s so boring.” They also drink. Some kids empty out Coke cans, fill them with beer, and guzzle at lunch. Everybody drinks on weekends, employing either the shouldertap method — they hang out near a store, spot a likely sympathetic soul, tap him or her on the shoulder, and ask if they’ll buy you some beer — or taking a chance at one of several local convenience stores at which the proprietors have difficulty guessing age.

Why drink? The school newspaper recently did a spread on teen-age alcoholism that included a survey of Gran! students. Replied one freshman to the question, “Because I have a great time watching my friends make fools of themselves and barf all over the place, and I have a great time making a fool of myself when I’m drunk.” A group of kids sit around a lunch table, laughing about getting wasted at a party. One of them looks up and says glumly, “Kids today, when they use drugs, it’s not for experimentation. It’s for escape. To be out of it. There’s just too much pressure from all sides.”

Pressure, pressure, pressure. This is the time of year the college-acceptance letters go out. It’s clear-cut: No one applies to Reed or Lewis and Clark because they’re too expensive. Real brains apply to Stanford, smart and serious kids yearn for the University of Oregon, and the soshes go to OSU (“so their high-school clothes will still be in fashion,” sneers Tony, a senior.) The buzz this week is that apparently no one from Grant was accepted by Stanford this year, something everyone takes as a blunt insult to the school.

Pressure doesn't slop there. How will you pay for college? How will you pay for new clothes? Will anyone come to your party if you only have a record player? No. And a color television? No. And a Betamax? Maybe. And a home computer? And cable? Now you're talking. Cable — MTV — rock video — everybody sing along with Devo: "Fishheads, fishheads-Roly-poly fishheads!" Grant students seem the weariest when they talk about money and success. Gordon Fullerton, Grant alumnus and astronaut, will come to speak at school soon. Nobody knows how bad it feels to work at Wendy's after school every day and still only have enough money to buy your spring shoes at

Leed's. And then they're cute enough that someone notices them and says, loud, in choir, hey, where'd you get your shoes? Do you lie and say Nordy's, or do you say, DAMMIT, I GOT THEM AT LEED'S WHICH IS A CHEAP STORE BECAUSE I DON'T HAVE ANY MONEY AND MY PARENTS DON'T HAVE ANY MONEY! No, you probably say, look, don't tell anyone, but I got them at Leed's. I mean shoes are just so expensive. And then say, with dead tiredness in your voice, Kids grow up too fast. Look at TV! The kids on TV now are only 16 or 17 and they're already stars! It just makes you feel like you have to be something already or you're a failure.

Paragraph exercises, Educational Resources Center, Grant High: If I had a million dollars I would _____ . I like people best who are _____. Girls should pay for dates because _____ .

There are no punks at Grant, no kids who wear their pessimism and anger as uniforms. The few that crop up now and then, with plastic-color hair and grim, black clothes, usually last a few months and then transfer to the Metropolitan Learning Center. "I couldn't take it at Grant," recalls one punky MLC graduate. "I got hassled to death." There are also no hippies. "Hippies?" wonders a Grant senior. He adjusts his tidy knit tie. Lots of boys at Grant wear ties. "Oh, you mean granolas. No. there aren't any granolas at Grant. It's not a very respectable thing to be these days. Actually, there are more granola teachers than kids." Hanging on the wall of the Activities Office: *Senior Week! Monday. Backwards Day. Tuesday. Hippie Day. Now Is Your Chance To Be A Flower Child. Reach Way Back Into Your Closet To Find Those Wild Rags — And Guys Can Really Grow Their Hair Long.*

There are lots of traditions. Perhaps the mood of the world makes students so unconfident that they like the certainty of tradition. Perhaps instability at home makes them hanker for something solid like the Rose Festival. Perhaps the economy feels like an ax hanging over their necks. "Mr. Whitlow! Let's plan next year's Senior Week," says one class president to the school activities director. Pause. Well, he'd love to but there's a good chance he won't be around next year. Won't teach if the school tax base fails and all his programs get cut. Won't teach if he has to join the pool of laid-off teachers who get farmed out to other schools. Oh. The students are struck dumb. School — hated, boring, prison-like school — suddenly feels like a privilege. Mr. Whitlow gone? Start talking, try not to think about it. In biology class, the teacher tells them, I played the supplies-politics game really well this year! I got us a human skull and a cat skeleton. Everyone is genuinely pleased about that. Then she says abruptly, but of course if the tax base fails, we won't get any of it. Maybe not even our basic supplies. Oh. The kids are struck dumb. Start talking then, and *try not to think about it.*

So tradition hangs on. Every day the class officers post a big sign that lists the day's birthday students. Dress-up week is around the corner. Seniors will come as Vogue or G.O. models; juniors in togas; sophomores as punks; freshmen in Nike outfits. Absolutely everyone, with the possible exception of the park rats, comes to the Rose Princess assemblies. Some of the school's most cynical girls even tried out for Rose Princess. "Sure, people are disillusioned by the Rose Festival," says Yvonne, who scorns high school niceties at every turn, "but even I tried out. I mean, that's a *real* tradition." At the morning assembly, the six princess candidates strut their stuff via tape and slide shows about themselves. They all cite their love of skiing, their close families, and tradition. Each slide show has one shot of the potential princess in her house; it's the only time the students break their respectful silence, to murmur to one another about the home's relative quality and plushness. "Why is it," wonders one girl, "that you never read in the paper that the Grant princess' father is a factory worker and her mom's a housewife? No, they're always somebody. It always works that way."

But they're not set against each other. There's envy and frustration but no apparent burning anger, except for an undercurrent of racial intolerance and the enduring non-status of the park rats. Is there such a thing as youth culture? A social-studies teacher asks his sleepy morning class. It's like rolling a rock down a hill: they start slowly but then just fly with answers. Teenagers set style and trends. Teenagers are afraid of being different. They have identity crises. They're dependent on their parents. They get lower wages than adults. They work in menial jobs. It's hard to get work. Nearly 40 per cent of us are unemployed. We're different than teenagers used to be. We're exposed to a lot more, through television and magazines. For our parents, *National Geographic* was the dirtiest magazine they ever saw. Youth is idolized. Look at teen models! We don't get any respect. Sex. Teachers put us down, telling us don't wear short shorts, don't wear miniskirts. This is a jail!

This is the first of a two-part article on high school. Next week, we go to class, eat lunch, study, and learn how to party.